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Part of Something Larger

Ephesians 2:11-22

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Did you know they can't find the cornerstone of the United States Capitol? There was a great dedication ceremony and laying of the cornerstone in the early 19th century when construction of the Capitol began. But over the years it sunk and was covered by gathering debris. It's exactly what happens to ancient cities when they are excavated by archeologists - sometimes they find complete cities built on top of older ones. One wonders whether the inability to find the cornerstone of the Capitol building of our nation has some metaphorical significance, as if we have lost our roots. There is a commission charged with digging here and there in order to find the cornerstone. A cornerstone represents the history and purpose of a building - it helps us remember why we are here. This seems a fitting illustration for the text this morning from Ephesians 2.

This passage was written to Gentiles. I remember as a college student in Bible study asking the question whether the Jews will be saved at some point in history. It was a good question but not a purely *biblical* question - Romans is clear in saying that God's promises are irrevocable; God has made a promise to preserve and to love Israel and God keeps God's promises.

No, the big New Testament question is, 'Will the *Gentiles* be saved?' That's an odder question for us, since most of us are Gentiles. Not all, mind you, but most. Yet this question about the Gentiles was the *primary* New Testament question - what about those who do not have the Scriptures, who know nothing of the words of the prophets, the promises of God to Israel? What about *them*?

Yes, says Ephesians, by an amazing act of God in Christ, the promises of God to Israel are brought to the Gentiles too. We outsiders to the workings of God's grace are brought in *by adoption*. That is, we can only be in God's family through adoption. *No one comes in here naturally; Christians are made, not born.* We weren't in the will, so to speak, but we have obtained an inheritance. By the seal of the Holy Spirit, we too have been marked as God's own people.

In writing Ephesians, Paul uses an architectural metaphor, and note please that he uses *verbs that are passive*. He doesn't say, 'You decided to join the church.' He says, 'you were *built*,' you were '*joined* together,' you were '*built* together spiritually.' That is, your relationship to this new family is not something *you do*. It's something done to you.

This is absolutely crucial to Christianity. Our adoption as daughters and sons into the kingdom of God comes from the action of God the Holy Spirit, not from our own action. This is the definition of grace.

Again, some of this passage is hard for us to grasp. That's because many of us have grown up in an America in which our

parents never worried whether or not we would grow up Christian. It was for so long the natural, normal American thing to be Christian. But some years ago, many people woke up to the fact that no one believe that today. The world in which Christianity was normal, natural, American has ended. If our children are to grow up in this faith, we will have to make them that way.

Our children watch an average of 15 hours of television every week. They are in church a maximum of a couple of hours per week. When they are watching television they are being bombarded with images of success, of the good life, of a goal of humanity that may be at a great variance with how the faith of Jesus Christ defines these success, a good life, or a goal for humanity. Suddenly, the church and its teaching and witness and worship and work become important as a way of instilling in us and our young a way counter to the world's ways.

Years ago a Roman Catholic theologian spoke of 'anonymous Christians,' people who were good and sincere but did not formally embrace the Christian faith. Sort of Christians at large, anonymous Christians, even though they didn't know that was what they were.

And in this characterization the Catholic theologian couldn't have been more wrong. The people of whom he spoke might have been good people, *but they were not Christians*. To be a Christian is to be someone who self-consciously follows, or is attempting to follow, not just the way of Christ, but Christ himself. A Christian is a person who has been adopted into a new community, and is a person who has a living, vital, relationship with Jesus.

A church without boundaries, with no borders, without distinctive marks, is hardly a church. Thus today's passage from Ephesians speaks of the church as a building, a house, a place. Perhaps there was a time when it was enough to be merely sincere, to have a warm feeling in your heart at the mention of the word *religion*, to try to do the best that you could in life in a wholesome sort of way. Perhaps. But, thankfully, yes I say *thankfully*, we North American Christians have returned to our biblical roots, and can now say with some confidence that we are like aliens in our culture, like missionaries in the very society we thought we had created.

This is precisely the kind of time, the kind of era, when this incredible text from Ephesians begins to make special sense to us. The church is an identifiable new family. It's bigger than the group we normally call family for it's made up of all those diverse people whom Jesus has called to follow him. We've been taken out of our nuclear, blood relative families, and adopted into the family of God, into a house with Christ as the cornerstone.

I want you to take comfort from this. Too often you hear people present their Christian faith as something that we do or decide. We say, 'When *I* gave my life to Christ,' or 'When *I* asked Jesus to come into *my* heart.' It's often all about me, my, myself. But this amazing passage from Ephesians 2 speaks of us in the passive tense and God in the active voice. It is *God* who called us here. God made a decision for us. God has built us as parts of this new household. God has broken down the diving walls between women and men, between the races, and the ages, and social classes. If you are here in church today, following Jesus, it's because <u>you</u> have been put here by God in Christ. I would not have chosen some of you! ☺

I say all this because it's a comfort to me to know that when all is said and done, my relationship to Jesus is not just a matter of what I feel or do or say, but what God in Christ, through the church, has done. I don't always feel or act or speak like a

Christian, but that's not the point. The point is that I have been called forth to be part of this strange, wonderful new divine experiment in human family called 'the church.'

Haven't you found this true yourself? How many Sundays have you come here empty, not really believing anything for sure? Then, through the music, or the reading of Scripture, or maybe even the sermon, you have felt faith growing in you?

Somebody once asked me if it's OK to say the words of one of our creeds even when you have trouble with some of the words it says? And my answer was, it's not *your* creed; it is the faith of the church. Sometimes, when you say the creed, you are anything but sure of your faith. But the great thing is that it isn't your creed. On those Sundays, the church is saying it with you, for you, until that time when you are able to say it for yourself.

Weekly, we pray a prayer of confession here. You may not feel like confessing your sin. Fine. We'll do it for you! We'll confess and perhaps you will sense our confession as your confession, and you will join us in Christian honesty about sin.

You are the church. We are the church. If you belong to Christ, if you have a relationship with Jesus, then you are one of a people who have been invited, called, built, joined into this new household. You have not been left on your own. You are no longer aliens from God, though in becoming part of God's house, you and I became aliens from the society around us. For a time, it appeared as if the society embraced our Christ-centered values. But it was never destined to last because at some point, following Jesus isn't about getting what you want. When the world didn't get what it wanted, it continued on its own path, and *we* are continuing on ours.

With Christ, we are a new people, a visible building for all the world to see. And ... unlike the world ...*we* have not lost *our* cornerstone!

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